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Aptness and Ambiguity in the Language of Law

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Abstract This study focuses on the language of law vis-à-vis the semantic features of aptness and ambiguity. It was motivated by the zeal to discover the connection between both features and the legal register in pure pragmatic terms. Previous studies have identified both semantic elements, among numerous other linguistic features, to characterize the language. None of the studies has, however, sought to identify the pragmatic impact of aptness and ambiguity on the language. Hence, the study is undertaken to identify the pragmatic impact of aptness and ambiguity on the language of law and also identify their socio-political/psychological/cultural implications. The purposive sampling technique was applied to select the verdict pronouncement on the corruption case involving Bode George and some other ex-NPA officials. This pronouncement provided the data for the study in view of the fact that it is sufficiently rich in legal register as well as for its celebrated nature on account of the fact that corruption is a cardinal bane of effective political leadership in Nigeria. One major finding of the study is that while aptness is a foregrounded semantic feature of the legal register, ambiguity is a most backgrounded element in the register which underscores the scholarly notion that the language of law objectifies utmost clarity due to its overall magisterial nature. Ambiguity is obviously most backgrounded in the register, because the register reflects none of its three conventional kinds: grammatical, lexical and structural ambiguities. It only reflects technical or incidental ambiguity, an arbitrary type that scarcely features in it. One pragmatic impact of the findings is that nobody who comes under the magisterial umbrella of the law can make excuse of ignorance on the ground of its language. Relying on the near exclusive apt nature of its language, the law is considered to be most objective in its jurisdictional principles, and so, cannot be responsible for the social ills of the Nigerian nation, the socio-political ones, particularly. Hence, these ills are blamed on the negative attitudes of both the leaders and the led, especially the former, all of whom are called upon to fear the law and do the right thing, since the law is ever ready to punish every offence fearing no king and tolerating no trace of illegality.

Keywords The language of law, Aptness, Ambiguity, Pragmatic impact, Verdict Pronouncement, Jurisdictional principles

1. Introduction

One notion held by legal practitioners about the language of law which virtually amounts to stating the obvious is that it is precise, logical and clear. In other words, the legal register claims precision, logic and clarity to be its cardinal expressive features. Nevertheless, to a novice in the legal profession the language of law is most enigmatic, and therefore, highly problematic. It is enigmatic and problematic, because decoding and comprehending it can pose a very tasking challenge, even to members of the bar and bench. This assertion explains why Alcaraz (1996:72) states that:

> Legal English is a complex and difficult language, not only for foreign scholars, but also for native speakers of English. This is why some English law students feel frustrated with their studies, since they have to master the disciplines inherent in the curriculum while at the same time unraveling the tangled web of a language that is as difficult for them as a foreign tongue.

Several other linguists have focused scholarly attention on the legal register. Some of such linguists include Mellinkof (1992), Smith (1995), Barlett (1955), Alo and Ogunsiji (2004) as well as Holly (2010). The totality of their findings regarding the linguistic features of the register is in tandem with Alcaraz's view above. Hence, in reality the correct notion to hold and express about the language of law is that it is not completely and totally precise, logical and clear. As shall subsequently be seen, it is also rather vague, sometimes imprecise and not quite disambiguated.

Nevertheless that it is sometimes imprecise does not mean that aptness is not significantly part of the characteristics of its lexicon. Similarly, that it is somewhat ambiguous does not render it semantically amorphous. In other words, aptness and ambiguity are integral parts of the semantic features of the legal register, albeit, in varying degrees.

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Before now, previous studies like those cited above appeared uninterested regarding whether the two semantic features impact positively or negatively on this professional language of lawyers. The studies have rather concentrated attention on deciding whether or not the language should be made registerially accessible to non-legal professionals. This debate has since categorized legal linguists into champions (supporters) of plain legal language and the traditionalists. The latter is resolute on retaining the statuesque, i.e. allowing the language of law to remain coated or technical.

The present study makes no attempt to uphold or resolve the foregoing controversy. It is rather centered on determining whether or not the two semantic features of aptness and ambiguity impact positively on the language of law in pragmatic terms.

2. Theoretical Premises: The Semantic Features of Aptness and Ambiguity

It is necessary here to concisely elucidate the semantic features of aptness and ambiguity. The elucidation is essential if their impact on the language must be grasped. Aptness as a semantic feature applies to diction. Diction refers to the choice of words in language use for both oral and written communication. Hence, the diction of a writer or speaker can be considered apt or inapt in semantic terms. Apt diction denotes appropriate or suitable word choice in relation to a given linguistic environment. Inapt diction, on the other hand, designates inappropriate or unsuitable choice of words in a given context. The foregoing clearly indicates that aptness refers to the appropriateness or suitability of diction in speech or writing. Gorrell and Laird (1973), therefore, define it as the use of words with precise meaning and appropriate tone. In other words, it demonstrates precision in one's diction.

It, therefore, follows that aptness in speech or writing is achievable only if the speaker or writer has a wide vocabulary base. To have a wide vocabulary base is to know the meanings of very many words. To know the meaning of a word incorporates having a sound cognitive notion of its usage prescriptions and proscriptions. This assertion mirrors Carter and McCarthy's (1988) submission that to know the meaning of a word includes:

a. Knowing how to use it, most appropriately
b. Knowing the relations it contracts with other words
c. Perceiving the relative correctness of the word as well as its more pragmatic and discursive functions
d. Knowing its various contextual meanings in accordance with its collocation patterns

The implication of the above explication is that aptness is hindered by low vocabulary base and one's inability to sharply distinguish between synonyms. See Laird and Gorrell (ibid). Moreover, observe that for Carter and McCarthy (ibid), knowing the meaning of a word is synonymous with being able to make a productive apt use of the word. Consequently, aptness is the only yardstick for determining a speaker or writer's knowledge of lexical semantics. One's knowledge of lexical semantics, in turn, depends largely on the difficulty level of the word to which one is exposed. Following Akande (2004:77), the difficulty level of a word is determined by

a. The user's previous experience in language use, generally
b. The user's method of vocabulary development
c. The intrinsic difficulty of the word, depending on its range of polysemy
d. The word's frequency of occurrence in general language use
e. The registerial restraints of the word

The foregoing paragraphs suggest that aptness is instrumental to avoiding ambiguous use of words. It may not, however, be useful in avoiding ambiguous use of other linguistic expressions such as phrases, clauses and sentences whether or not the expressions are rhetorical. In other words, ambiguity in the use of other linguistic expression is avoidable only by means of mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs). In strict linguistic terms, therefore, without taking cognizance of the situational context of a discourse, ambiguous expressions are unavoidable.

Consequently, Quiroga-Clare (2010) asserts that language cannot exist without ambiguity which is both a curse and a blessing. Ambiguity is a curse if it substantially proves problematic in connection with required meaning-derivation. On the other hand, it is a blessing if it manifests in speech or writing as a linguistic device. If and when it is so deployed, its use is certainly stylistic, and therefore, intentional. Hence, ambiguity could be a mark of deficient or proficient language use, depending on whether or not the use is stylistic i.e. intentional or unintentional. For proficient language users it is indispensable in both oral and written discourse.

Ambiguity features in language use when specific linguistic expressions are open to two or more interpretations. It connotes uncertainty of meaning in relation to such expressions as evident in:

a. John enjoys painting his models nude. (ibid.)
b. Visiting relatives can be boring. (ibid.)

Furthermore, ambiguity extends to any verbal nuance which gives room for alternative reactions to the same linguistic elements. The above definitions corroborate Quiroga-clare's (ibid) assertion that ambiguity in language is the uncertainty within the very core of the organized system of language. Together with the stylistic inevitability of ambiguity, its inherent uncertainty illustrates the complex nature of language, especially in poetry where it is deployed to significantly make poems objects of interpretation. Christian Holy Writ also shows a very high reflection of linguistic complexity arising substantially from ambiguity, which explains the countless interpretations given to its various parables and phenomenal inventories by different interpreters: theologists, philosophers and evangelists

(pastors).

Ambiguity is of three varieties: lexical, structural and grammatical. Lexical ambiguity resides in single words and is pervasive. It is pervasive, because independent of context, most (English) words are polysemous. A very typical example is *ambiguity* itself as a word which has several meanings as stated in the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English*. Another typical example is *tea* which has seven denotative meanings. Ambiguity resides in phrases, clauses and sentences. See (a) and (b) above for two sentential examples. Grammatical ambiguity arises from faulty punctuation as evident when the comma (,) is misplaced or omitted in marking off a subordinate clause. A very good example of this kind of ambiguity is found in Oluikpe (1981:134): While they were shaving the sergeant a man whom they heartily disliked suddenly appeared. Observe that the above typical structural ambiguity can be disambiguated by simply inserting the comma (,) immediately after *shaving the sergeant* or *shaving* depending on the writer's intended meaning or the reader's perceived meaning. Because it arises from wrong punctuation, grammatical ambiguity is disambiguated by mechanically rectifying wrongly punctuated sentences.

Several tropes or linguistic figures naturally incorporate ambiguity: metaphor, metonym, allegory, homonym, homophone, homograph and paradox, among others. Allegory and metaphor provide typical illustrations. Allegory is a classic example of double discourse that avoids establishing a center within a text and as such is ambiguous. As a creative writing device, it unfolds a literary plot by means of symbolic characters. Invariably, metaphors as obvious vehicles of ambiguity emphasize the freedom of the reader and not the authority of the writer. Hence a sound conceptual grasp of such tropes enhances disambiguation. Disambiguation refers to the resolution of a given instance of ambiguity. It is most handy if the above insight is effectively combined with word sense and situational linguistic context specifics. Cf. Quiroga-clare (ibid). That linguistic situational context specifics catalyze disambiguation is not in doubt, given Sigmund Freud's postulation on the nature of meaning:

> If everything is viewed as a transition from something else, then in the antithetical meaning of primal words, every experience must have a double meaning, i.e. for every meaning there must be two aspects. All meaning is only meaningful in reference to and in distinction from other meanings. There is no meaning in any stable or absolute sense. Meanings are multiple, changing and contextual.

Freud's postulation is underpinned by Ferdinand Saussure's own assertion that there is no mutual correspondence between a word and a thing, which makes the ascription of significance difficult.

It is necessary at this juncture to state that basically every speaker or writer intends to express one meaning. For such basic speakers or writers, ambiguity can only be identified as an accidental linguistic feature of their speech or writing. For master speakers, however, it would be identified as a proficient stylistic marker deployed to:

a. express concurrent actions in form of double or multiple meanings.
b. on the basis of a, achieve spatial economy by means of composite expressions.
c. play on the reader's intelligence to possibly deceive him or her.
d. on the basis of c, instantiate persecution, oppression and/or death against target victims.
e. on the basis of c, to secure exoneration, commendation and or liberation for favorites.
f. intellectually tease or rattle the audience.

3. Preliminary Insight: A Concise Overview of the Linguistic Features of the Language of Law

Previous studies such as Alo and Ayo (2004:202-203), Melinkoff (1992: vii-viii; 1963: 25-27; 321-322), Barlett (1955:66), Smith (1995:190) and Holly (2010) have identified several linguistic features in the language of law. An overview of these features is necessary, so that some insight can be provided regarding the legal register. It is essential to provide such insight, if we must effectively capture the pragmatic impact of aptness and ambiguity on the register. The language of law reflects in legal documents, prosecutions and verdict pronouncements. It is also the instructional medium for the training of legal translators and interpreters. Basically, it relies heavily on legal precedents i.e. legal tradition, thoughts and culture. Hence, it is as conservative as its professional domain is most universally reviled. It is highly conservative because it is hardly innovative. Its conservative nature is evident in its profuse use of classical registers which are generally Latinate, Greekophone and Anglophone. Examples of its classical lexicon are *null and void*; *sine qua non* and *ultra vires*. This conservative nature of the language of law subsumes its archaic nature demonstrated by its use of such lexical items as *hereinafter*, *heretofore* and *aforementioned*. Its archaic nature is indicative of its high difficulty level. Its high difficulty level, cognitively tasking even to legal pundits, explains why the legal profession is almost universally reviled. The profession is so reviled that some scholars like Sir Thomas More imagine a world without lawyers just as others such as William Shakespeare, jocularly, suggest the elimination of all lawyers. See *King Henry VI*: a classical play.

For Mellinkoff (1992: ibid) its largely Latinate registers are synonymous with dead and deadly words which connote imprecision and/or obfuscation in semantic terms. The imprecise and obfuscate nature of its classical lexicon is intensified by its deviant syntax and style in penal codes and constitutions across the globe. This syntax and style are

basically characterized by long sentences that comprise compound, complex and compound-complex structures. These sentences are loaded with ideas by means of co-ordination and sub-ordination, most likely for the purpose of avoiding consequential alteration and misinterpretation. Still on legal registerial syntax and style, the language is further characterized by sparse use of punctuation marks except capitalization and the period. The register also thrives on foregrounding and appositive construction. The former serves to enable it emphasize by the use of extensive capitalization of names, titles and addresses, while the latter aids it to achieve proper identification which generally reflects in affidavits, various legal deeds and judgment papers. The examples of legal documents listed above illustrate impeccable grammaticality and precision of expression (aptness) in order to avoid vagueness and achieve clarity.

The paragraph immediately before this shows that most legal terms are products of borrowing and amalgamation and are indicative of imposition. This assertion is underpinned by the catalogue of Francophone lexical items that also constitutes its vocabulary: *ex post facto*, *voire dire*, among numerous others. Moreover, the language of law reflects pomposity, inflated verbiage and self-glorification. The self-glorification inherent in the language gives its speakers too much sense of self-importance compared to what is said. This assertion underscores the indisputable public opinion that lawyers are generally arrogant. Their arrogance is surely indisputable in view of the general formularic expressions that characterize their professional vociferations: *learned friend/counsel*, *honorable judge*, *leading counsel*, *prove beyond reasonable doubt* and others. It is also pertinent to note here that the self-glorifying nature of the legal register strongly correlates with its putative propensity: *I put it to you that . . . .* By this putative propensity, lawyers impose their personal notions or convictions upon their clients or opponents. Hence, Mellinkoff (1963:25) considers it to be magisterial and lexically treacherous, incongruous and flabby (ambiguous).

This overview reveals the language of law to be characterized by both aptness and ambiguity together with numerous other linguistic features. Ambiguity, however, appears to be minimally reflected in it. However, the overview has not evinced how both semantic features pragmatically impacts on the language. Consequently, we proceed in the analysis that follows to investigate the presence or absence of this impact, and given its presence, to show whether or not it is positive. In the context of this study pragmatic impact refers to observable socio-political, psychological and socio-cultural effects.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analysed and discussed in this study are excerpts of the verdict pronouncement on the corruption charge leveled against Bode George and other ex-officials of the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) by the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). See *The Punch* of Thursday, October 29 2009 (p.43). The excerpts are as contained in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Excerpts of the Verdict Pronouncement on the Corruption Charge between Bode George/Other NPA Ex-Officials vs. the FGN

Serial Number	Issues before the Court (a)	Defending Counsel's Subsequent Submissions (b)	Prosecutor's Responses (c)	Clarifications (d)	Verdict Pronouncement (e)
1	. . . whether the prosecution proved the allegation of inflation of contracts contained in counts 1-7 of the amended information against the defendants beyond reasonable doubt	. . . that from the evidence adduced, the defendants were not charged in their personal capacities but as chairman and members of the board of the NPA and that the board of the NPA is not a public officer although the defendants may be public officers in their personal capacities. Hence, failure to show that the NPA is a public officer is fatal to the prosecution's case	…that having admitted in their joint written address that the defendants are public officers, the defending counsel is estopped from arguing otherwise	The onus of proof is on the prosecutor in line with Section 36(5) of the constitution and 138 of the Executive Acts. The standard of proof is one beyond reasonable doubt. This level of proof is attained when every ingredient which constitutes the alleged offence has been proved.	The facts indisputably before the court are that the defendants are natural persons who were appointed to serve as directors on the board of the NPA, a public corporation owned solely by the FGN and established under an act of the National Assembly, the NPA Act 38 of 1999 (hereinafter referred to as the NPA Act)….
2	. . . whether the prosecution proved the allegation of abuse of office by splitting of contracts contained in counts 58-68 beyond reasonable doubt	. . . that since the defendants acted jointly as a board who participated in the alleged infractions, they must be so treated and that if treated as a board they are the agents of the corporation and cannot be held culpable	…that the defendants are being prosecuted for alleged criminal infractions committed while in office and that where there are multiple offenders there is a prosecutorial discretion as to who to prosecute	Section 2 of the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act provides a definition of public officers as follows: Public officer means a person employed in the public services of the federation, state or local government, public corporation or private	In the circumstances I hold that the defendants as persons who served as directors of a public corporation, the NPA are properly before the court in that capacity and are consequently public officers within the contemplation of the

		personally in accordance with Section 1 of the NPA Act and Section 65 of the Companies and Allied Matters Act		company wholly or jointly floated by any government or its agency including the subsidiary of such company whether located within or outside Nigeria and includes judicial officers serving in masgistrate's area or customary courts or tribunals	ICPC Act.
3	…whether the prosecution proved the allegation of disobedience of lawful orders contained in counts 1-57 of the amended information against the defendants beyond reasonable doubt	…that since members of the board of the NPA are statutorily stipulated, by leaving out certain members of the said board who participated in the said infractions, the prosecution has committed a fatal error and thereby the proper defendants were not duly constituted before the court	…that adopting the arguments urged by the defending counsel on this issue will create an absurdity	Where a statute is clear and unambiguous, the operative words in it should be given their simple ordinary grammatical meanings. See Omoyen vs. Gov. State (2004)5 NWLR(PT865)175 and Araka vs. Egbue (2003)17NWLR(PT848)1 … The defendants would not and can not thereby become an indivisible entity.	The second point raised in this regard which is an extension of the first one is that since the defendants are before the court as the board of the NPA which has a statutory composition, by leaving a few of them out the defendants are therefore not fully before the court…. As earlier held, the defendants are before the court as persons who served on the board of the NPA from 2001-2003. The board of the NPA are inanimate and only individuals who serve as directors are tangible.
4	…whether the prosecution proved the allegation of conspiracy to obey lawful orders contained in count 8 of the amended information against the defendants beyond reasonable doubt	…that exhibit P1 can not be validly used as proof in this case in the presence of the evidence relied on to arrive at the conclusions therein	…that the definition of public officers contained in Section 2 of ICPC Act must apply and that the said section includes natural persons employed as directors on the boards of public corporations who could be charged for alleged criminal infractions apart from the corporate bodies they work for	The decision as to who is to be proceeded against is a prosecutorial discretion which the court can not interfere with as it is derived from the constitutional powers of the Attorneys -General in this case the Attorney-General of the Federation under Section 174(1) of the constitution.	

The data in Table 1 were sourced from the law report published by the trial court of the case in question in the referenced edition of *The Punch*, a widely read national daily in Nigeria. The report is captioned *Why Bode George is Guilty on many Counts*. The title of the report obviously indicates that the trial judge returned a verdict of guilt on the case which explains why the defendants served a jail term in Nigeria. The prelude to this verdict pronouncement is what is reproduced in Table 1 {1-4 (e)}.

By means of the purposive sampling technique, the data were selected for analysis in this study, because they sufficiently reflect the linguistic features of the language of law upon which the study centers. Moreover, they form part of the most celebrated verdict pronouncement within the first decade of Nigeria's resuscitated fledging democracy. The pronouncement is so far the most celebrated one for the fact that the litigation that led to it boarders on a corruption case. The case is of general interest to Nigerians, not only because of the stupendous magnitude of the corruption involved, but also because corruption has in numerous quarters and studies been identified as the forest king of ineffective political leadership in Nigeria. Again the verdict pronouncement on the case challenges the seemingly intractable culture of impunity among Nigerian political and public service elites. In addition, the case is among the few conclusive ones of its kinds in recent political history of Nigeria and it touches on the ethos and pathos of the average Nigerian's psyche, especially in connection with political attitude. In other words, Nigerians generally believe that the eradication of corruption from the polity is synonymous with positive radical political leadership resuscitation, hence, their celebrated interest in any corruption case.

Now taking a studied look at the language of law in relation to aptness and ambiguity, the first observation that comes to mind is that the language thrives much more on aptness than it does on ambiguity. This fundamental observation agrees in toto with the assertion made in the second paragraph of the preceding overview of the legal register. The legal register, being magisterial as has been scholarly established, always ensures that it never leaves anyone in doubt as regards its intended messages. That is, it endeavors at all times to encode its intended meaning with the highest degree of precision. Consequently, its intended messages are always almost exactly the same with its expressed messages, i.e. it objectifies clarity at its peak. The pragmatic impact of this pervasive apt nature of the legal register is that it logically and firmly supports one of its pragmatic maxims: *Ignorance is no excuse in law*. On the basis of this maxim, the register enables legal professionals to be sure that nobody who comes under its magisterial umbrella and who adduces ignorance as an excuse can conveniently do so as a result of their inaptness. Sequel to this impact is that of jurisdictional transparency which guarantees justice. Jurisdictional transparency means that the court has nothing to hide in its adjudication process.

The pragmatic impact of aptness on the language of law is obviously indispensable in verdict pronouncement. Why? Verdict pronouncement connotes prosecution and conviction which goes with every litigation process that does not end with acquittal. Such a pronouncement, therefore, denies the convict either or both of three essentials: money in form of fine or damages, liberty and the right to life, depending on the stipulation of the penal code as determined by the magnitude of the offence in question. The referenced case for this study illustrates this assertion as explained at the beginning of this analysis. Given the above undesirable options, it behoves the judge to ensure that nobody who faces or audits a trial process is at sea regarding how the accused is convicted and why the convict is fined, incarcerated or sent to the gaol. The judge is ethically bound to be transparent in this regard because the liberty or life of a human being is at stake and the possibility of losing either makes the process a most sensitive one that demands serious caution. The sensitive nature of the trial process justifies the near exclusive centering of the legal register on aptness with its attendant pragmatic impact. Consequently, lawyers and judges as well as other judicial officers are most professionally apt by virtue of their training, such that making clarifications is integral to their professional practice.

Hence, one can rightly assert that legal practitioners generally objectify disambiguated communication in the practice of their profession. See 1-4 (e) of Table 1. Observe that doubtlessly in the light of the referenced legal authority, 2 (d) particularly serves to convince the defending counsel and the accused that the latter are public officers should the nomenclature sound ambiguous to them. Again, observe that 3 and 4 (d) specifically serve to unequivocally establish that the accused are duly before the court in their ex-official capacity as NPA directors just as 3 (d) distinctly underscores the innate desire of both the bar and the bench for unambiguous professional communication. Also observe from the table that the information in every column is virtually unambiguous. In fact, the entire table is devoid of stylistic ambiguity. It contains only a few 'incidental or technical ambiguities'.

The few structural and lexical ambiguities contained in the table are arbitrarily classified as in the preceding paragraph, because they are pure jargon (core legal technical terms). The non-stylistic nature of these ambiguities as well as their scanty frequency underpins our earlier assertion in line with the overview before this discussion that the language of law is almost completely disambiguated. In mathematical terms, the language is approximately unambiguous. This conclusion is valid, because the legal register has little or no place for connotative meaning or underlying messages as it virtually makes no use of tropes: figurative and other rhetorical expressions. In other words, every meaning or message in the language of law is hardly implicit. Another justification for the conclusion is the disambiguating role of context in language use, especially situational context. This role automatically nullifies the few technical ambiguities identifiable in the language of law.

With reference to Table 1, examples of incidental ambiguities are *prove beyond reasonable doubt*; *natural persons*, *fatal error* and *inanimate*. See 1-4 (a) as well as 1 and 3 (e). The first of the examples features in 1-4a to conclusively state the condition under which conviction can be secured with reference to each substantive allegation. Indisputably, the reciprocation of the expression in all the issues before the court serves an emphatic purpose. As already stated, the expression is ambiguous independent of context. It is so because different persons including the prosecuting and defending counsel will, otherwise, give variant interpretations to the formularic expression. That is, the notion of what it means to prove a case beyond reasonable doubt will vary from one interpreter to another and there will be as many such notions as there are interpreters. The judge is aware of these possible variant interpretations even as its meaning is contextually derivable. Hence, resolved to give no room for any misinterpretation in the face of likely contextual oversight, he provides an operational definition for the expression. See 1(d) for the definition.

The second and third examples, like the first, are structural ambiguities outside their contexts of use. In truth, the second example considered independent of context translates to meaninglessness apart from being ambiguous. Yes, because to make reference to natural persons is to say that unnatural persons exist which makes no sense. Alternatively, it will amount to stating that those referred to are abnormal human beings which is abusive, and therefore, offensive. Nevertheless, the example being a legal jargon does not pose this semantic problem since whoever is conversant with the legal register knows that limited corporations are unnatural (non-biological) persons before the law who can sue and be

sued. The third example is also a legal jargon and as such promptly resolves the structural ambiguity it yields. Hence, it is contextually understood to mean an error (a mistake) capable of denying victory to the prosecutor. Outside its situational context, however, it could mean a very costly mistake or a mistake capable of denying the culprit his life. The last example qualifies the board of the NPA to contextually mean that its members do not collectively constitute a person before the law, i.e. they are no unnatural persons as such, as opposed to the NPA as a corporation. Hence, the whole of 3 (d) which contains the example is the judge's way of emphasizing that the accused are before the court in their personal capacities, i.e. as individuals rather than as NPA officials. The stand of the judge holds water, obviously because the accused are direct beneficiaries of their corrupt indulgence as individuals, since they did not and could not have acted on behalf of NPA in the course of it. However, independent of its context of situation, the example is an instance of lexical ambiguity that yields several alternative meanings:

i. NPA board members are not alive, i.e. they are dead.
ii. NPA board members are not inspired.
iii. NPA board members are not incited.
iv. NPA board members are not lively or vivacious.
v. NPA board members are not motivated or encouraged.

Given the foregoing insight, the language of law can be said to heavily rely on truth-conditional semantics as explicated by Palmer (1981: 195-201). In the final analysis, the language can rightly be considered unambiguous, many thanks to situational context specifics. The pragmatic essence of its disambiguated nature is precisely the same as that of its apt form. In discourse terms both aptness and disambiguation serve the purpose of ensuring utmost clarity which anchors their pragmatic impact. Hence, barring human attitudinal complexity, the language of law is naturally poised to dissuade gross misconduct and even minor offences since the law as mirrored in its language knows no king and tolerates no trace of illegality.

5. Implications of the Study for the Rule of Law in Nigeria and across the Globe

Given the findings of this study, its implications are as interesting as they are cardinal. These implications cut across the socio-political, psychological and socio-cultural life of Nigerians and other nationals. The first implication is that the law is jurisdictionally most objective in the determination of allegations brought before the court. Hence, an accused person is acquitted or convicted depending on the merit of a given case. The second implication is that the law values truth as evident in the case cited for this study. It, therefore, relies exclusively on evidence and authority rather than sentiment. The value of evidence and authority to the law is such that its foremost jurisdictional maxim is that it is better to release a thousand criminals than to convict one innocent soul. This implication strongly correlates with its heavy reliance on truth-conditional semantics which objectifies untainted logic and clarity.

Arising from both implications is that the law is ever ready to punish offenders upon conviction in a court of competent jurisdiction. This ultimate implication of the study serves to deter gross misconduct in form of heinous crimes and torts as well as minor offences and juvenile delinquency. Unfortunately, however, most of these offences go unpunished in Nigeria and several other third-world countries, especially with reference to political and public service top officials. For instance, as publicly known, nobody has been convicted in Nigeria of any of the numerous political killings reported in the mass media between 1999 to date. The offences went unpunished, because on account of attitudinal lapses on the part of law enforcement agents, they escaped the magisterial beam light of the law. Consequently, the culture of impunity is in place now as in several previous republics and most of the intervening military regimes in the country. This culture is incontrovertibly the Naboth and Jezebel of the currently 'critically ill Nigerian polity' as asserted in Onyemelukwe and Alo (2010:13) which has recently metamorphosed into a failed nation. The culture of impunity in Nigeria is fundamentally a consequence of the nation's deplorable political leadership coupled with the flawed psyche of the citizenry traceable to the largely crude indigenous culture of the native ethnic groups in the country. Hence, the jurisdictional tenets of the law challenge all Nigerians now more than ever to fear the law and positively effect radical character transformation. In other words, the law requires every Nigerian and global citizenry, by extension, to constantly submit to the rule of law.

6. Conclusions

One major finding of this study is that while aptness is a foregrounded semantic feature of the legal register, ambiguity is a most backgrounded element in the register which underscores the scholarly notion that the language of law objectifies utmost clarity due to its overall magisterial nature. Ambiguity is obviously most backgrounded in the register, because the register reflects none of its three conventional kinds: grammatical, lexical and structural ambiguities. It only reflects technical or incidental ambiguity, an arbitrary type that scarcely features in it but never without being contextually disambiguated. One pragmatic impact of the findings is that nobody who comes under the magisterial umbrella of the law can make excuse of ignorance on the ground of its language. Relying on the near exclusive apt nature of its language, the law is considered to be most objective in its jurisdictional principles, and so, cannot be responsible for the social ills of the Nigerian nation, the socio-political ones, particularly. Hence, these ills are blamed on the negative attitudes of both the leaders and the led, especially the former, all of whom are called upon to fear

the law and do things right, since the law is ever ready to punish every offence fearing no king and tolerating no trace of illegality.

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